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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000305

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SUBJECT: MALI NEGOTIATES WITH BAHANGA AS NEW GROUP ATTACKS
AGUELHOK

REF: A. BAMAKO 00299
1B. BAMAKO 00256
1C. BAMAKO 00290
1D. BAMAKO 00239

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: On March 26 President Amadou Toumani Toure's personal military advisor, Brigadier General Brehima Coulibaly, and the leader of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), Iyad ag Ghali, traveled to Tripoli to participate in Libyan-brokered negotiations between Mali and the Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC) led by Ibrahim ag Bahanga. ATNMC spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed will represent the ATNMC at the talks in Tripoli. On the morning of March 26 an apparently new group of Tuareg rebel/bandits attacked Malian military base in Aguelhok, between Kidal and Tessalit. After exchanging small arms fire with the Malian military for several hours, the attackers withdrew. Several children were reportedly wounded by stray bullets during the fire-fight. It is not clear if the attackers were associated with the ADC or the ATNMC. Preliminary information indicates that the attackers were not affiliated with any previously declared rebel movements - a detail that could signal an unfortunate new development for northern Mali. End Summary.

Back to Tripoli

2.(C) Libyan sponsored negotiations between the Malian government and the ATNMC began on March 27, following the March 20-22 clashes between Bahanga's ATNMC and the Malian military (Ref A). According to Hama ag Sid'Ahmed, the ATNMC's Paris-based spokesman who doubles as Bahanga's father-in-law, the ATNMC killed 43 Malian soldiers, wounded 63, destroyed 12 vehicles and 4 BRDMs. Sid'Ahmed claims that the ATNMC captured 6 vehicles, ammunition and 33 prisoners. Alla ag Alladi, who is one of the few Tuaregs to have been in regular contact with Bahanga since the skirmishes began, told the Embassy that Bahanga held 45 hostages, although this number may include the 9 severely wounded soldiers released by Bahanga on March 21. A delegation from the Malian Red Cross, which visited the hostages on March 27 and is expected back in Kidal shortly, should be able to provide the exact number of detainees.

3.(C) Hama ag Sid'Ahmed is negotiating on behalf of the ATNMC in Tripoli. A March 27 interview with Bahanga published in the Algerian newspaper El Khabar and reprinted on Tuareg websites quotes Bahanga as saying that he did not

travel to Libya himself because he "has the conviction that the war is going to continue for a long time" and therefore preferred to send Sid'Ahmed instead. In a second article posted to Tuareg websites from the Algerian newspaper El Watan, Mohamed Ali Baye - an Ifoghas Tuareg of the Ifergoumessen faction who lead the ATNMC's first wave of attacks against the Malian military on March 19-20 - calls for Algerian mediation.

Unknown Tuareg Group Attacks Aguelhok

4.(C) During the early morning hours of March 26 Tuareg bandits attacked the Malian military post in Aguelhok, located between Tessalit and Kidal. The attack was apparently led by Eghless ag Oufene who was, until he decided to attack the Malian army, a financial officer for a UN funded agricultural development program in Kidal. Others believed to be associated with the attack in Aguelhok include Abdullah ag Albacar, the Mayor of Tessalit, and Hama Moussa. Both ag Albacar and Moussa are believed to be deeply implicated in northern Mali's drug trafficking business.

5.(C) The attackers allegedly descended on Aguelhok with at least five 4x4s, including one ag Oufene may have taken from his employer in Kidal. Small arms fire continued throughout the morning of March 26 until the Malian military, which had just shifted soldiers away from Aguelhoc to reinforce Tinzawaten and Abeibara, managed to repel the attackers. Seven children were reportedly wounded by stray bullets.

6.(C) Some reports place Bahanga's deputy, Hassan ag Fagaga,

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at the scene of the attack. Contacts in northern Mali, however, have yet to provide any firm indication of Fagaga's participation. One source speculated that if Fagaga were indeed implicated, he could have been acting independently of Bahanga. Unlike operations organized by the ATNMC, the attack on Aguelhoc was seemingly led by Tuaregs without formal military training. After the fire-fight seven wounded attackers traveled to Bordj-Mokhtar in Algeria for medical treatment. Two of the wounded Tuareg attackers are in their late teens or early twenties.

Comment: The Downside of Buying Out Bandits

7.(C) The March 26 attack on Aguelhok could very well be a product of Mali's decision to negotiate with Tuareg bandits like Bahanga. Ag Oufene, ag Albacar and Hama Moussa's ties to Algeria have also fueled speculation of Algerian involvement now that Libya has overtaken Algeria as northern Mali's mediator of choice. Given the Malian military's evident weaknesses, a negotiated settlement like the one reached by Iyad ag Ghali and Libya three weeks ago to secure the release hostages taken by Bahanga in August 2007 (Ref B) was one of Mali's only viable options. For northern Malians watching from the sidelines, however, the buy-out of Bahanga likely translated into one message: banditry, hostage-taking and attacks on the Malian military pay. It is perhaps more than a bit ironic that ag Oufene attacked Aguelhoc on the day ag Ghali and President Toure's senior military advisor traveled to Tripoli to negotiate the release of more hostages captured Bahanga. At the same time, Libya is managing a parallel process with members of Mali's Berabiche community to negotiate an end to northern Mali's other hostage crisis involving AQIM and two Austrian nationals (Ref C).

8.(C) Bahanga's deputy Hassan ag Fagaga has figured into some of the many conflicting accounts of the attack on Aguelhoc. Fagaga's involvement, or lack thereof, remains unclear. Available details of the attack suggest it was orchestrated by a group of disaffected Tuaregs acting

independently of either the ADC or ATNMC. Both the ADC and ATNMC are dominated by the Kidal Ifoghas tribe and their operations are typically led by prominent Ifoghas rebels like ag Ghali, Bahanga, Fagaga and Mohamed Ali Baye. Eghless ag Oufene belongs to the Idnane tribe. Abdullah ag Albacar and Hama Moussa are both Taghat Melet (Ref D).

9.(C) If ag Oufene and the others were indeed acting independently, Aguelhok could be the first instance of new groups of rebel bandits taking matters into their own hands. The monetary rewards reaped by leaders of the ADC and the ATNMC following victories over the Malian army undoubtedly play a role in these calculations. The key difference for ag Oufene was that in Aguelhoc the Malian army prevailed. If, however, ag Oufene and his accomplices managed to disappear into the desert as Bahanga and the ATNMC have done following each of their attacks, other restive northerners may conclude that lightening strikes against the Malian military carry little risk if one loses and a good likelihood of a high pay off in one wins.

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